

FROM DESIGNER THROUGH SPACE TO SPECTATOR: TRACKING AN IMAGINATIVE
EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE ACTANTS OF A SCENOGRAPHIC EVENT.

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the degree of a Master of Arts in Theatre and Performance.

Faculty of the Humanities

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

FROM DESIGNER THROUGH SPACE TO SPECTATOR: TRACKING AN IMAGINATIVE EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE ACTANTS OF A SCENOGRAPHIC EVENT

By Illka Louw

October 2013

The aim of this enquiry is to deepen the understanding of the author's practice as theatre designer, scenographer and visual dramaturge in a postdramatic milieu. This study creates a theoretical frame for a research-led performance that is especially dependent on the release of 'active energies of imagination' (Lehmann, 2006:16). The performance will take the form of a scenographic event, which does not depend on 'the principles of narration and figuration' (Lehmann, 2006:18). Instead it relies on a 'visual dramaturgy' in which just as in front of a painting, activates the dynamic capacity of the gaze to produce processes, combinations and rhythms on the basis of the data provided by the stage' (Lehmann, 2006:157).

The study proposes that the release of 'active energies of imagination' (2006:16) extends beyond the space of the live event, tracking its origin to the interaction between the designer and the materials of her art. Here the blurred division between material, object, space and time will be investigated —a fluidity of the division between human bodies, bodies of space and bodies of materials —by unpacking the concept of 'fluid space' (Moll & Law quoted by Ingold, 2011:86).

Furthermore, the enquiry investigates the efficacy of humans and non-humans involved in the creation of the scenographic event, and the possibilities of viewing their relationship to one another as 'actants' (Latour quoted by Bennett, 2011: i). In the process of unpacking the concept of the actant and how it relates to scenography, the study proposes an exploration of the spaces

between materials and the efficacy of those spaces as actants, by interrogating the Japanese concept of ma (Pilgrim, 1986:255).

In tracking the elements of scenography that may be involved in creating a theatre beyond drama (Lehmann, 2006:37), the explication proposes a practice-led research performance where the viewer's imagining of the event becomes a co-actant thereof.

This study tracks a link from the designer's initial interaction with the materials of her craft as a manifestation of her imagining of the event, to the performer's material interaction, through to the spectator's imaginative interaction.

University of Cape Town

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Introduction

The aim of this explication is to articulate discoveries made during research undertaken for my Master of Arts in Theatre and Performance at the University of Cape Town's Drama Department. In it I develop a theoretical framework for the practice-led research I will be engaging in with my final thesis production, while in broader terms aim to deepen an understanding of my practice as set and costume designer, scenographer and visual dramaturge in a postdramatic milieu.

While referring to my MA course-related projects, recent performances seen at the 2013 World Stage Design Exhibit (WSD), and drawing from my professional practice, I engage in a process of developing theories on the efficacy of a scenographic event from the perspective of the viewer. I would argue that these perspectives are intrinsically linked. Brook alludes to this as follows:

The exchange of impressions through images is our basic language: at the moment when one man expresses an image, at that same instant the other man meets him in belief. The shared association is the language: if the association evokes nothing in the second person, if there is no instant of shared illusion, there is no exchange.
(2008:87)

This explication is therefore a procedure of discovery (Ingold, 2011:20) which shifts and flows between my observations as an image-making artisan - experiencing the materials with which I make images in order to create that exchange - and as onlooker of a performance, feeling within myself, the force of a 'sympathetic inner movement' (Bachelard, 1994:65) as materials and their properties converge, creating an imaginative and imagistic scenographic event.

In a postdramatic sense, the event that I am referring to as a scenographic event speaks of a form of performance which does not depend on 'the principles of narration and figuration' (Lehmann, 2006:18), neither on human presence on stage nor on the creation of an illusion of a three-dimensional 'walled-off ...fictional totality' in order for it to occur (2006:12). Instead, my

aim is to create a theoretical frame for a research-led performance that is especially dependent on the release of 'active energies of imagination' (2006:16) that extend beyond the space of the live event, pointing to the interaction between the designer and her materials as the origin of these energies. I propose a performance, not of meaning in the dramatic sense of the word, but of 'forces, intensities' and 'present affects' (Lyotard quoted by Lehmann, 2006:37) in which there is a fluid transition and exchange between human bodies (the performer, designer, spectator), the body of space, the bodies of materials and the body of time in an imaginative, imagistic and kinaesthetic manner. I propose to investigate that blurred division between material, object, space and time - the fluidity between human bodies, bodies of space, material and object bodies - by unpacking the concept of "fluid space" (Moll & Law, 2011: 86) where there are no objects of perception, but sets of relations or "haecceities" with which we 'perceive' (Deleuze & Guattari quoted by Ingold, 2011: 87). Furthermore, I will engage with the concept of 'vital materialism' (Bennett, 2010: 57) that investigates the efficacy of humans and non-humans, and the possibilities of viewing their relationship to one another as 'actants' (Latour quoted by Bennett, 2010:i) within the greater whole of a scenographic event. The question to be asked and answered is 'how do these actants contribute to the flow of imaginative exchange?'

In my process of unpacking the concept of the actant and how it relates to scenography, I investigate the spaces between materials and the vibrancy of those spaces. I explore the Japanese concept of *ma* that aims to articulate the multi-layered concept of the interval between two or more spatial or temporal things or events (Pilgrim, 1986:255). I initiate an enquiry into how the scenographic event 'collapses space and time' (1986:256). *Ma* also alludes to the spatio-temporal element of stillness. Thus I ask: what role does stillness play in the exchange between the actants in a scenographic event, and how does stillness and seemingly empty space contribute to the flow of imaginative exchange?

In tracking the ontological elements of the scenographic event that may be involved in creating a theatre beyond drama (Lehmann, 2006:37), I make some proposals towards a performance where these elements engage and interact in order to create an exchange between the scenographer/ designer, the performance and the spectator. In this process I question the location of this imaginative exchange. I also propose that the efficacy of the viewers as live actants in the exchange of images is linked to their imagining of the event as it unfolds, drawing a link from the designer's initial interaction with the materials of her craft, to the performer's material interaction, through to the spectators' imaginative interaction. I investigate some theories of Gaston Bachelard, who seeks to discover the 'primacy of the poetic image', the root of the image-producing 'force' in poetry (1994: *xxxix* and *xlvi*). In so doing, he analyses the materiality of imagination and clarifies the process of the materialisation of images by investigating its fundamentally dynamic nature. My aim here is to investigate whether the same analysis can be applied to the scenographic image.

While taking all of the above into consideration, I will suggest potential impulses towards creating a starting point for my final thesis production.

Contextualisation and Terminology

This thesis is informed by my interaction with the materials of my craft as set and costume designer when the 'intimate and unfolding nature of a conversation' (Munnelly, 2008:63) occurs between myself as a visual artist and the materials I choose to work with as well as, in a broader sense, the way in which the thinking about my practice flows from that of theatre designer to visual dramaturge. In this section I also introduce to some extent - a context for the title of my explication. A brief historical description tracking what is meant by the terms 'designer', 'scenographer' and 'visual dramaturge' will enable the reader to engage with the underlying practice that this thesis draws upon.

The designer has from a Western European historical perspective, been responsible for the accurate realisation of the scenic elements of a play; the 'things' we see along with the actors on stage. The nature of these scenic elements has been strongly influenced by the ordering of the visible through perspective drawing (Lehmann, 2006:79) and the framing device of the proscenium arch of an end-on stage. Lehmann discusses the dramatic orientation of a proscenium stage which, he argues, feeds into the notion of the drama text and its prescribed mise-en-scene, thus bringing to the audience a whole and complete world. He defines this as 'dramatic theatre' (2006:22). The designer of such a pictorial world was not required to offer an interpretation of the play but merely to fill the requirements of the mise-en-scene as the text prescribed. Furthermore, the textural treatment of surfaces was partly the responsibility of the designer who would oversee the accurate execution of the set's rendering according to his/her drawings and model. Pavis (cited by McKinney & Butterworth, 2003:5) points out that a traditional approach to the mise-en-scene is one where performance as well as the space of performance is discovered in text:

It is presupposed that text and stage are bound together, that they have been conceived in terms of each other: the text with a view to a future mise-en-scene, or at least a given acting style; the stage envisaging what the text suggests as to how it should be performed in space.

Lehmann continues the discussion by stating that 'dramatic theatre ends when these elements are no longer the regulatory principle but merely one possible variant of theatrical art' (2006:22). The designer's role altered alongside this shift in theatre practice and a preference for the use of the term scenography- a European term ironically associated with the crafts of scene painting and perspective drawing-came into use. The shift in the meaning of this term occurred in the 1960s when Josef Svoboda, Czech pioneer in the field of modern day scenography, expressed the need to consider scenography and the scenographer as a mere decorator of the performance space as had been the designer and her designs, but as a 'component of performance' (McKinney &

Butterworth, 2009:3). More recently, the term has shifted to include the experience of the audience in the sense of how the stage space could make a 'dynamic and kinaesthetic contribution to the experience of performance' (2009:3). I would argue that the journey of the term *scenography*, in itself, maps the journey of the designer and her relationship to her art.

The shift in the terminology by which designers describe their work has, in many respects, been indicative of the designer's quest for auteurship of the performance event and a shift in her relationship with what is presented on stage. In viewing the exhibits and performances on offer at *World Stage Design 2013* in Cardiff, Wales (WSD), it was evident that formal text-based design is certainly not the only means by which designers interact with theatre and performance and that text-based dramaturgy is not the only form of auteurship. Lehmann alludes to a 'visual dramaturgy' that:

does not mean an exclusively visually organised dramaturgy but rather one that is not subordinate to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic (2006: 93).

Lehmann, further, summarises:

Under the banner of visual dramaturgy, the perception of theatre no longer simply prepares for a 'bombardment' of the sensory apparatus with moving images but, just as in front of a painting, activates the dynamic capacity of the gaze to produce processes, combinations and rhythms on the basis of the data provided by the stage. (2006:157)

Thus, the manner in which the data provided on stage has arrived there has moved away from compartmentalised job descriptions in which the designer draws, makes models and drafts her creative output as prescribed by the playwright or the director. The designer is now, as visual dramaturge, in many instances the initiator of a performance piece. Although the concept of visual dramaturgy alludes to the independence and auteurship of the designer, it does not fully describe

the nature of the actual performance that is the product of this independence. It is also prudent to consider that the activities of 'designer', 'scenographer' and 'visual dramaturge' did not develop in isolation from one another and that their functions, engagement with materials, and outcomes overlap in many regards. As Lehmann suggests, the 'postdramatic' form cannot be seen in isolation from the dramatic form as the one developed from the other.

It is at the intersection between the materials of design and the live kinesthetic materialization thereof that I propose to engage with my research. I propose a scenographic event that seeks to marry the act of engaging with materials of design (drawing and painting on paper, draping and tearing of cloth) with the spatio-temporal scenographic event, while acknowledging the auteurship of the designer as a visual dramaturge. This 'scenographic event' opens up the possibility for a thesis production which traverses the space between performance, installation and performance art. Lehmann states that 'the theatre shares with other arts of (post)modernity the tendency for self-reflexivity and self-thematization' (2006:17). In other words, the theatre has the capacity to create work that scrutinises its own form. It is with self-reflexivity that I propose to re-encounter the materials of design and scenography and map the imaginative 'exchange of impressions through images' (Brook, 2008:87).

Material Matters: The Efficacy of Materials

...The bottomless well of my unspeakable grief finds exquisite pleasure in the tearing of 7 running meters of Liquid Glass...

(Ilka Louw, 2013)

As a theatre designer, when I put my ideas on a page, in a model, on a performer's body, or in a space, I focus on 'material matters'. Here, the fluidity and uncontrollability of ink on paper or the particular qualities of fabric moving on the body and in space are interconnected, engaging with the spectator in the form of a work of art or a performance event. The relationship between artist and the space where the spectator meets the vision of

the artist is described by British sculptor, Antony Gormley:

Drawing is an attempt to fix the world, not as it is, but as it exists inside me.... Drawing is not so much a mirror, or a window, as a lens which can be looked at in either direction, either back towards the retina of the mind, or forward towards space. (Gormley quoted by Caiger-Smith, 2010: 113)

Looking towards space through the materials I engage with was, in part, the task for a one-person performance in March 2013. As part of my MA course, I focused on an exploration of fabric. I performed this task at the WSD exhibition as part of an informal discussion on practice-led research to scholars, designers and visual dramaturges. The task was performed in September 2013 at Rhodes University as part of an interdisciplinary event titled *Material Matters*. Here the departments of Fine Art, Anthropology and Performance Studies met to discuss the intersection between the artist's engagement with her materials from the perspective of the painter and the theatre designer. As a designer and costumier I am very familiar with the material manner in which fabric 'performs' and the process of 'negotiation' involved in discovering what it will and will not 'do' as it is cut and sewn in order to become a garment. The placing of myself as co-performer during this task has, however, provided a very different sensate experience of cloth.

The impetus for movement came from my close observation of the two structurally diverse pieces of fabric - in this case glass organza and non-woven fusing - and their particular material attributes. These attributes influenced the way in which the fabric reacted to the force I applied to it and its interaction with the atmosphere or negative space with which it was in constant exchange. Multiple actions occurred in a cyclic flow: I was engaged in my physical task of activating the fabric while also observing the fabric's reaction to my touch. During this process of engrossed activity, I started feeling a shift in intention. It was no longer the properties of materials I was interested in. Instead, I was drawn to the particular qualities of these materials. I would agree with

Pye's observation of this shift:

The properties of materials are objective and measureable. They are out there. The qualities on the other hand are subjective: they are in here; in our heads. They are ideas of ours. They are part of the private view of the world which artists each have within them. We each have our own view of what stoniness is. (quoted by Ingold, 2011:30)

As I responded to the qualities of the material I found myself altering my movements, rhythm and intentions in relation to how the fabric moved and interacted with me. The final action-and a shift in focus and understanding of what I was engaged in - came with the discovery of the efficaciousness of the fabric. That is, a certain 'imaginative exchange' (Brook, 2008: 87) occurred, and I derived a meaning from our interaction which altered my intentions and on which I based all my consequent actions.

Munnelly describes her immersive interaction with charcoal on paper while she scrutinises her relationship with the act of drawing in a 2008 performance piece titled *The Aesthetics of Immersion*: 'In such habitation of the artwork I was dependent upon thoughts about the work to emerge by way of my own bodily immersion in time and matter' (Munnelly, 2008:71). *Material Matters* drew my bodily immersion with space and materials towards a deeply resonant interactive experience as the mental images of what the cloth and I were creating, started to flow and layer rapidly. The sound and resistant pull of the tearing of glass organza drove me to tears, while the crackling sound of the non-woven fusing drove me to pinning it as if it were a voodoo doll.

In his description of some forms of postdramatic theatre, Lehmann alludes to this resonant experience in a discussion of Kantor's work:

One could almost say that the verbal dialogue of drama is replaced by a *dialogue*

between people and objects ... The hierarchy between human being and object is relativized for our perception.... In Kantor's theatre... the human actors appear under the spell of objects.... To valorize the objects and materials of the scenic action in general. ... objects gain a remarkable tactile quality and intensity. (Lehmann, 2006:73)

Here, as I had experienced during *Material Matters*, the co-creator of the event might be an inanimate object where the 'human actor' is not seen to be the primary source of action.

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010) political ecologist, Susan Bennett, proposes a theory on the relationship between animate, and what are usually termed, inanimate objects. Bennett argues for a re-evaluation of our perception of objects that are not endowed with human consciousness. She observes that:

The world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects.... This appearance may be indispensable to the action-orientated perception on which our survival depends, but it is also dangerous and counter-productive to live this fiction all the time. (Bennett, 2010: xiv)

Bennett reflects on the vital power of seemingly passive objects such as landfills, generating lively streams of chemicals, as well as omega-3 fatty acids, which can transform brain chemistry and mood (2010:42). She theorises a 'vital materiality' that runs through and across bodies, both human and nonhuman, recognising the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Bennett describes this as 'a capacity...to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own' (2010: i). She articulates a need to 'dislodge agency from its mooring' (2010:30), arguing that the term is inadequate for encompassing the affective vitality of inanimate or non-conscious and non-human objects. Their efficacy lies in the effect these objects have on one another and their 'power to alter the direction or function of the whole' (Bennett, 2010: 42).

Bennett observes that the concept of 'efficacy points to the creativity of agency... the capacity to make something new appear or occur' (ibid: 31). As an alternative and more precise description of this efficacy, Bennett cites Latour, who describes objects with such vitality, as 'actants', and she then defines the concept of the 'actant' as:

a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events; something whose competence is deduced from [its] performance rather than posited in advance of the action. (Bennett 2010:i)

While observing the video footage of *Material Matters* (on 20 September 2013) and my interaction with the fabric, I come to realise that the cloth and I are actants along with another co-creator, the space in which we move.

In the next section, I introduce thoughts on the efficacy of space as a scenographic actant, focusing on the live event of performance.

Susurro's Wave: Space and Flow as Scenographic Actants

""[S]pace is the main object of creation. It is charged with energy...it shrinks and expands. Space is also an agent in the creation of multiple realities"" (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009:124 quoting Kantor).

Although much has been written about the breaking down of the 'fourth wall' (Lehmann, 2006:12) which describes the imaginary boundary between audience and performer, and the inclusion or immersion of the audience in the creation of 'multiple realities' (2009:124), that same audience seems at times to remain passive, not quite part of the performance event. Yet, even a seemingly passive audience member may experience a profound resonance with a performance. Why should one discuss the audience in a section dedicated to space? The answer to

that might begin with Brook's statement of the exchange between audience and performer, the exchange of an image. What, then, is the medium through which we exchange image and meaning? Lehmann suggests that: 'Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place (Lehmann, 2006:17). The space of the audience is therefore not a separate entity from the performance space, as it might have seemed in traditional dramatic form where the spatio-temporal separation was created metaphorically through use of *mise-en-scene* stipulated by the text. I would argue that due to the live aspect of performance, the actual performers and audience remain present in the same space at the same time, be it in a dramatic or postdramatic form of performance.

Western ideas of space seem to dictate that objects, including ourselves, take precedence over the space that encloses and surrounds them. When observing a performance, our eye tends to move with objects and not with what the objects leave behind. We do not see the space we move in as part of the event of moving. Instead, we tend to assume that space has no efficacy. In *Being Alive* (2011) anthropologist Tim Ingold, develops alternative views on the efficacy of space and the relations between people and their environments. He argues for a differentially permeable delineation between space and objects. Initially, Ingold agrees with Gibson's view that it is by their outward surfaces, where more or less solid substances come up against the 'volatile medium' (Gibson quoted by Ingold, 2011: 87). Ingold shifts from a static impression of space and objects to theory which incorporates action and permeable possibilities:

[T]he division of earth and sky gives way to flows and counter-flows of materials.... [W]hat we call the ground is not really a coherent surface at all but — just like the skin — a zone in which the air and moisture of the sky bind with substances whose source lies in the earth in the germination and growth of

living organisms. (2011:87)

The concept of matter and space engaged in a porous reciprocation of 'flows and counter-flows', relates to Gormley's approach to his sculptural art and its relation to:

[T]he body as the site of experience; as space rather than object....He has come to see our skin not as a 'boundary' between what is visible ...and what is outside us but as porous, 'a constellation rather than an unbroken surface'. (quoted by Craiger-Smith, 2010:95)

The focus of this section lies with the flow of space as we experience its efficacy in a scenographic event. My approach is not bound to the human body as the initiator of the event, but that of the body of space and its reciprocal flow and interaction with human and non-human bodies.

Susurro, as performed and exhibited at WSD 2013 creates a zone for flow and interaction, as does both Finnish visual dramaturge Pirjo Valinen and performer PirjoYli-Maunula, who have created a thirty-minute scenographic event, 'a creation myth ... a ritual' where 'paper is elementalit creates *Susurro*'s natural phenomena, its laws of physics, it's very fabric of being.' (<http://vimeo.com/64300023>). Originally a costume designer by profession, Valinen transposes the material of her design process, namely paper, on and into the performance space where its properties and qualities become the central actant, driving the action of the performance.

A solitary mound of sculpted paper 'sits' centre stage. It is surrounded by a delicate rice paper ring which lies seemingly inert and is used as mere stage delineation. The spectators are seated in a half-circle, 'hugging' the rice paper border. In the centre of the circle, a single figure seems dormant in tectonic layers of black and ivory coloured paper. Rising from her paper haven at an excruciatingly slow pace, the figure balances an almost diaphanous, shellacked, oversized black paper headpiece on her head and carries a shawl of the same

material around her shoulders which creates the impression of a sloughed and dried-up landscape of charcoaled skin. The cracking of paper in movement reminds one of the sound of icebergs breaking, while the mound becomes a sculpted paper dress that slowly unfurls as the figure rises. Initially, *Susurro* moves at a Noh-like pace as spectators witness the extremely slow progress of the figure awakening from this paper landscape, rising and eventually moving in gradual concentric circles. As the figure accelerates, her silhouette expands and the paper mound becomes a slightly airborne dress as its larger-than-life presence becomes more pronounced. The dervish-like momentum of the dress's movement hurtles the performer into rapid circles. At times it seems as if the dress is wearing the wearer, as its momentum hurtles her into ever-widening and rapid arcs. At this stage, the spectators start to feel the wind created by the movement of *Susurro*. With this realisation comes an awareness that the inert tissue paper ring is responding to the change in atmosphere. It is rising in a wave-like progression, until the entire ring of individually overlapped rice paper sheets are balanced vertically. The pieces closest to the audience blow against our legs and we feel the quivering vibration of *Susurro* as its own creation myth comes to life. The entire space is suspended in a sensate vibrancy of interacting flows and counter-flows between human and non-human materials, space and time, as the power of the paper dress is made tangible, quickening the invisible actant that is space. *Susurro* and its spectators remain in a state of heightened tension until the circular movement subsides and the gradual stillness of the atmosphere returns, causing the paper ring to collapse onto itself. The audience has, by virtue of its spatial connection to it, been a vibrant actant in the making of the scenographic event of *Susurro* and the exchange of 'active energies of imagination' (Lehmann, 2006:16) between performer, performance and viewer has been tangible and fluid.

In this 'collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space

in which the performing *and* the spectating takes place' (Lehmann: 17), the flow of actants could be described as a state of, what Mol and Law have termed 'fluid space':

In fluid space there are no well-defined objects or entities. There are rather substances that flow, mix and mutate, sometimes congealing into more or less ephemeral forms that can nevertheless dissolve or re-form without breach of continuity. Every line —every relation —in fluid space is a path of flow, like the riverbed or the veins and capillaries of the body. (Ingold, 2011:86)

The concept of 'fluid space' as an actant in the scenographic event, holds a strong association with movement, and hints at a constant state of motion. One might well ask what the significance is of the stillness and emptiness of the moment when the *Susurro* wave collapsed, and what the significance of the lack of objects and the lack of movement in a scenographic event? Lehmann observes that:

The play with the low density of signs aims to provoke the spectator's own imagination to become active on the basis of little raw material to work with. Absence, reduction and emptiness are not indebted to a minimalist ideology but to a basic motif of activating theatre. (Lehmann, 2006:89)

Positive and Negative Space

In this section I will introduce the potential of stillness and emptiness as actants of scenographic imagination by discussing some initial ideas on the use of space from the perspective of the visual artist who interprets and describes the two-dimensional painting or drawing surface as positive and negative space. This section serves as an introduction to the spatio-temporal elements of stillness and emptiness and reflects on its efficacy in the making of scenographic imagination.

Munnelly observes that the 'artist knows the act of drawing a line on a blank piece of paper activates the spatial qualities of the paper' (Munnelly, 2008:77). Berger expands this,

thus:

I now begin to see the white surface of the paper on which I was going to draw in a different way. From being a clean flat page it became an empty space. Its whiteness became an area of limitless opaque light, possible to move through but not to see through.... Yet when I make a mark, the nature of the page changed again, the area of opaque light suddenly ceased to be limitless. The whole page was changed by what I had just drawn. (1972:167)

The transformation of the blank page for both Berger and Munnely involves the act of inhabiting the page through mark making. Once a mark is made, the relationship between page and viewer shifts. The page, consisting of a void or indicating the part of the page where there is an *absence* of marks, is described as negative space. The spaces surrounding the mark now exist only in relation to it. The mark itself might be an abstract form, or a perspectival realistic image. In either case, the *presence* of a mark shifts the significance of that part of the page and it becomes known as a positive space. When likening the idea of positive and negative space to the presence or absence of objects, I shift the focus from the two-dimensional surface in visual art to the three-dimensional live scenographic event. In theatrical terms, characters entering and exiting, set changes, lighting changes and blocking, the entire *mise-en-scene*, contribute to our observation of a seamless transition between positive and negative space and a continuous flow between presence and absence. The absence of action and the absence of objects seem to engage in a symbiosis, conflating into one concept of space-time which plays itself out during performance. Contemporary Noh actor, Kunio Komparu discusses negative space in performance thus:

Nowadays space is often described as ... positive or negative. Negative space is enclosed and fixed, and positive space is the space taken up [or occupied] by people or things that define a negative space by their presence. Both kinds of

space exist in Noh: negative space (ma) is the stillness and the emptiness just before or after a unit of performance, positive space is produced by stage properties and by the dramatic activities of performers....The two kinds of space are connected by time.... While there may be empty or negative time, there will never be unsubstantial, uncreative or uncreated time. (Komparu, 1983: xx)

Although I would argue that the correlation between presence, absence, positive and negative space is more discernible in some aspects of the scenographic event than in two dimensional static art, the live kinaesthetic nature of the event makes it difficult to discern and hone each concept individually. I would agree with Bennett, who in explicating her 'philosophical project' proposes that we 'think slowly an idea which runs fast through modern heads' (Bennett, 2010:i). The pace and durational nature of a live performance event calls for a slowing down in the analysis of each actant- a pause for thought in order to grasp the significance of the present.

The Concept of *Ma* as a Scenographic Actant

I sit *In* Silence,

An only child kind of

Silence

I wait, a Sunday afternoon kind of

Wait

And I stare unashamedly at

The Cloth

Stares Back

And Waits

(Louw, 2013)

I return to the video footage of *Material Matters*. I notice after a space of time, that movement of material and performer through space give way to stillness and an attentive silence. I observe myself become still when the cloth becomes still. As I watch, I remember myself observing the mental space between images. The feeling has time and space to settle as the cloth has time and space to fall and settle in a heap on the floor, time for meaning to become significant. The action and the stillness of the fabric and performer seem to merge in the scenographic image. In developing these images, the material's-in this case fabric's - particular attributes, were employed to link the body and the spatial field, to intensify and magnify the presence of space and the exchange of meaning between performer and space. I come to realise that the cloth and I are actants, along with another group of co-creators: silence, stillness and time.

The Japanese idea of *ma* aims to articulate a multi-layered concept of the interval between two or more spatial or temporal things or events (Pilgrim, 1986:255). *Ma* alludes to an additional spatio-temporal element; that of stillness. In this chapter I examine the potential efficacy of *ma* on the making of scenographic imagination, and its role in the exchange between actants at play in a scenographic event.

According to Pilgrim, the concepts of space and time in the ancient Japanese worldview are not fully separated, but are correlative and omnipresent (1986:256). Space is not independent of time, while time is not abstracted as a regulated, homogenous flow, but is believed to exist only in relation to space. Pilgrim points out that:

The collapse of space and time as two distinct and abstract objects can only take place in a particular mode of experience that empties the objective/subjective world(s); only in aesthetic, immediate, relational experience can space be perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it. (1986:256)

Ma seems to link the spatial and temporal into an overarching concept with multiple applications

and meanings, wherein the actants involved (space, time, observer, participant and materials) are interdependent in the making of meaning. The concept of *ma* does not conform to the Western post-Renaissance preoccupation with human beings as the centre of experience. Instead, *ma* refers to a state that can occur with or without the presence of human agency, a state of non-human immersion. How the immersion then occurs for the spectator is based on the layering of non-human actants such as silence, stillness and space-time. Pilgrim highlights a reference to the concept of main Lao Tsu's Chinese religious text, the *Tao TeChing*:

Thirty spokes share one hub
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will
have the use of the cart.
Knead clay in order to make a vessel.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will
have the use of the vessel.
Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room.
Adapt the nothing therein
To the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room.
Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is
By virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.
(1986: 264)

Ma refers to a sense of location in space, for example the space within the walls of Lao Tsu's room, but also to the dynamic relationship of objects to one another, the sense of standing in-between, among and with; that is, the sense of space standing in between walls. In architectural design, the concept of *ma* emphasises the importance of opening, bridging space, and a concept of form defining space rather than space serving form (Pilgrim, 1986: 261). *Ma* also defines space as an entity that is interdependent with the structures that contain it, while simultaneously

highlighting that such structures carry value only in relation to the spaces they contain.

The temporal element of *ma* describes an interval when positive space, narrative sequences and forms of art dissolve into creative/substantial negative space, that is, imaginative or emotional spaces (Pilgrim, 1986:261). While *ma* describes a unit of stillness as well as an object of stillness, it also encapsulates the means by which stillness can be embodied. *Ma* is simultaneously the moment before movement and the means by which we sense the moment of movement (1986: 269), an expectant pause. *Ma* thus refers to a simultaneous awareness of intellectual concepts of form and non-form, object and space and subjective experience (1986: 266).

In illustrating the application of *ma* in the performing arts, Pilgrim references the ancient art of Noh performance. Noh actor, Kunio Komparu, relates *ma* to Noh, noting that:

Noh is sometimes called the art of *ma*. This word can be translated into English as space, spacing, interval, gap, blank, room, pause, rest, time, timing, or opening.... Of course both understandings of *ma*, as time and as space, are correctBecause it includes three meanings, time, space, and space-time, the word *ma* at first seems vague, but it is the multiplicity of meanings and at the same time the conciseness of the single word that makes *ma* a unique conceptual term, one without parallel in other languages. (Komparu, 1983:70)

Komparu comments on ancient Noh master, Zeami's experience of *ma*:

Zeami is suggesting implicitly the existence of *ma*. He is saying that Noh acting is a matter of doing just enough to create the *ma* that is blank space-time where nothing is done, and that *ma* is the core of the expression, where the true interest lies. (1983:73)

This negative space-time is therefore anything but a mere nothing awaiting positive space-time; it is a pregnant nothingness that is 'never unsubstantial or uncreative' (Pilgrim, 1986: 259). *Ma* could also be defined as an imaginary space, and when related particularly to painting, tea ceremonies,

gardens, and calligraphy, while negative space-time is 'filled' by the imagination more than by some thing.

The 2003 video, *The Fullness of Emptiness* as described in Munnelly (2008: 73-77), seems to explore some of the elements of *ma* through the process of making art. This video work is inspired by the dust residue made during her drawing process with charcoal. There is no human interaction except for the presence of the spectator. This is a scenographic event that does not make use of a human actant as performer. The still images taken from the video, show 'an empty white room... and a large amount of charcoal dust that is (eventually) dropped into the white space from up high and out of sight' (Munnelly, 2008:75). In titling the video work *The Fullness of Emptiness*, Munnelly says she is 'paying homage to the void's potential to operate both positively and negatively' (Munnelly, 2008:75). The seeming paradox is achieved by what I would describe as the progressive filling of emptiness until its fullness appears as emptiness once more. In observing the event by means of the use of still images, the effect of black charcoal pouring onto a white surface produces a graphic contrast which creates a heightened awareness of this transition. The black spear-like incision of black dust pouring in from the top of the white room 'invades' the seeming empty space, but as the dust hits the bottom edge of the room, it billows upward, becoming a powdery cloud which disperses itself to such an extent that it inhabits the entire room in a grey haze. It is as if the emptiness/ fullness of whiteness has now been replaced with the emptiness/fullness of blackness. Munnelly quotes Bachelard who 'deploys a spatial analogy to collapse the ostensible opposition between 'full' and 'empty' when he observes that the "'function of inhabiting constitutes the link between full and empty'" (2008:77).

The Fullness of Emptiness speaks to our relationship with materials as well as the spaces they seem to inhabit. Here the charcoal dust and the atmosphere brought in relation to it, exchange positions. The charcoal no longer inhabits the position of positive space. It unfolds as a grey haze

to *become* its environment. Matter and space are no longer separate objects. White room and charcoal are one. The *ma* of this scenographic event inhabits a type of spatial tension between our idea of what emptiness and fullness is and the observation of their interactive flow. The emptiness is never truly empty.

Ingold proceeds with a proposal on how we could approach the relationship between space and materials. He states that it is:

...in short, a world of materials. And as the environment unfolds, so the materials of which it is comprised do not *exist*-like the objects of the material world- but *occur*. Thus the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. In that sense, every property is a condensed story. To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate. (2011:30)

I would argue that *ma* is, therefore, an expression or description of flow as much as it is a description of emptiness and stillness. **It** is a pregnant nothingness that is 'never unsubstantial or uncreative' (Pilgrim, 1986: 259). Its power lies in the way that we are able to frame moments of change with stillness or emptiness. The stillness and emptiness of *ma* cannot exist without its relation to flow. Together, these actants play their part in creating a live event of which we are witness to, and co-creators of.

Imagination as Scenographic Actant

If we accept that scenographic events are comprised of 'narrating events in ways that present non-human materialities as bona fide participants' (Bennett, 2010: 62), we also need to show how these participants or actants fuse to create a meaningful, or even meaningless, experience.

The making of an image on a stage cannot be the final destination of the scenographic event. Its significance, or rather the manner in which it becomes significant, must be addressed. I propose that the role of the audience member is one of the primary actants in the act of making meaning, but that the cycle of exchange between all actants needs to be expressed in the service of an overarching actant. I also suggest that imagination is such an actant and serves as a link between the co-creators of the scenographic event. In this section, I unpack some initial ideas on the affective use of scenographic imagination as an actant within a scenographic event. I investigate some theories of Gaston Bachelard who seeks to discover the 'primacy of the poetic image', the root of the image-producing 'force' in poetry (1994: *xxxix*, *xlvi*).

Although the chief focus for Bachelard is an analysis of poetry, I propose to interpret the concept of poetry as an act not limited to the writing of poems. Instead, I would argue, that the focus on poetry points to the use of imagination in a creative and artistic manner, which can be seen as a universally human activity, not restricted to the act of writing. I propose to apply Bachelard's discoveries to the scenographic event which, I would argue, is in itself a creative act.

Bachelard refers to a poetry of touch (1994: 82). In returning to the idea of the efficacy of materials, it seems, here, that Bachelard begins to draw a link between our bodily experience of materials and our interpretation of their qualities in the choices we make when we write, or, I would argue, draw, paint or perform the particular meaning we derive from our encounter as actants with that of the co-actants of the scenographic event. Bachelard states:

If poetry is to revive forces of creation in the soul, if it to help us to relive our natural dreams in all their intensity and all their functions, we must understand that the hand, as well as the eye, has its reveries and its poetry. We therefore have to discover the poems of touch, the poems of the modeling hand. (Bachelard,

1994: 82)

For Bachelard the connection between our bodily experience of materials and our interpretation of their qualities is not encompassed by the concept of perception. Instead, Bachelard argues that the primacy of this encounter between hand, eye, body and mind is located in the imagination or specifically the materialisation of imagination. Bachelard suggests that poetic images have the ability to fuse emotion and symbol (1994: *xlix*). He explains that this fusion occurs through the act of imagining, which 'magnifies and deepens beyond what is given, and has the capacity to gather the whole world into a simple image and (to) incorporate the whole subject within its reverie' (Bachelard, 1994: *xlix*). In his analysis, Bachelard speaks of a vitality of poetic imagination. In seeking the root of the image-producing force in poetry, he analyses the materiality of imagination and clarifies the process of materialization of images by investigating the imagination's fundamentally dynamic nature. I would argue that the basic structure of the scenographic event is dynamic, resonant and — sometimes — *rapturous* by nature. In addition, I believe that the flow between actants is carried by a through-line of imagination of all human actants originating with the designer or visual dramaturge, moving through the performer and flowing towards the spectator. Bennett also refers to the particular contribution our physical engagement with materials makes to the way we start to engage imaginatively with the making of images: Instead of formative power detachable from matter, artisans encounter a creative materiality with incipient tendencies and propensities, which are invariably enacted depending on the other forces, affects or bodies with which they come into close contact. (Bennett, 2011:56)

I would argue that the creative materiality that Bennett is referring to and the vitality of imagination Bachelard refers to, correlate with one another, and are not encounters exclusive to artisans or artists. As co-actants in the event the audience shares in that encounter. Our ability to feel the exchange of the imaginative touch of the qualities of materials (objects, bodies, space)

imbues the live event with a particular efficacy, creating a resonance amongst its human co-actants.

In seeking the primacy of the poetic image, Bachelard moves systematically through a deductive process of elimination, discarding the idea that poetic images are symbols. He argues that if we describe poetic images as mere symbols we create a sense that images are static and fail to articulate their vitality and the flow of actants. Bachelard states that symbols tend to connect us to our cultural pasts and to foist a repeated academic mythology onto poetry (1994: x). He argues that we cannot study poetic images as things, but that they are 'lived, experienced and re-imagined' (1994: xli). In my view, the same could be said of scenographic images, and the primacy of the scenographic image could be described as an 'unfolding of a total system of relations comprised by the [actants] embodied presence in a specific environment' (Ingold, 2011: 86). That environment is the space that performers, objects, space and audience inhabit together in the present time of the scenographic event.

Bachelard suggests that poetic images must re-activate the material imagination, that is, they must infuse familiar images with a second life and, in so doing, cannot remain static, but must be in flux and subject to change: for if there is no change there is no imagination and no imaginative action. Poetic images 'reverberate with the [spectator's] consciousness and lead [her] to create a-new [with]... the poet' (Bachelard, 1994: xli). The creation of a performance and experience of it are simultaneous at such a live event (McKinney & Butterworth, 2009: 175). I would therefore agree with McKinney and Butterworth that the 'meaning of a performance is created by the performers and spectators together, in a joint act of understanding' (2009: 176). I would argue, however, for an extension of creative origins to include the material processes which the designer engages with prior to the performance of the event.

The fundamentally dynamic nature of imagination is occupied with movement and force,

not matter (Bachelard, 1994:xlvi). That is, the materiality of imagination is not occupied with objects that are static in symbolic meaning. Bachelard states that classical philosophy has accustomed us to an antithesis between matter and form. In contrast, for Bachelard, matter provokes a relationship between subject and object, and that this relationship is the 'mother-substance' of all dreams (1994:xliv). Perhaps the most significant aspect of Bachelard's poetic materialism is the 'consequent devaluation of the imagination of forms', and the 'privilege given to depth over surfaces'. Material imagination is 'this amazing need for penetration which, going beyond the attractions of the imagination of forms, thinks matter, dreams in it, lives in it, or, in other words, materializes the imaginary' (1994:xlvi).

Conclusion

The aim of this explication has been to track the 'energies of imagination' (Lehmann, 2006:16), between myself as designer and visual dramaturge through my imaginative and practical use of the materials of my art and my bodily engagement with particular properties and qualities of these materials, while extending the study of these materials' efficacy beyond my body, towards the body of the performer, the body of space and time, through to the body of the spectator witnessing the event.

I have tracked the connection between these bodies towards an understanding of their value as equal 'actants' (Bennett, 2010: i), working together in a non-hierarchical cycle of flow and counter-flow in a state of 'fluid space' (Mol & Law, 2011:86) in which human action is not necessarily the primary motivation for action. The concept of fluid space, and its relation as an actant in the scenographic event, holds a strong link to movement, and hints at a constant state of oscillation. This touches on the ideas of Bachelard, who explains that 'imagination, when occupied with movements and forces rather than with matter, is dynamic by virtue of its content' (Bachelard, 1994:xlvi). Bachelard is specifying that imagination is a moving force, and not

necessarily that the image which is developed in imagination is in motion. Stillness and emptiness are, therefore, also dynamic contributors to an imaginative experience.

In *Material Matters* I experimented within the frame of a task of observation, immersion, submission and action in which fabric was my co-actant in the scenographic event. During this performance task, I became aware of the value of stillness and negative space as equally forceful actants. It is within the stillness of an interval, and the void of empty or negative space, that a confluence of meaning and a layering and deepening of the significance of multiple images is able to develop. I would argue that 'imagination materializes the imaginary' as stillness and silence sets in (Bachelard, 1994: xlvii).

My reading of the Japanese concept of *ma* further formalised my ideas around the efficacy of space as a meaningful scenographic actant, as *ma* describes a multiple spatio-temporal state. While *ma* describes a unit of stillness as well as an object of stillness, it also encapsulates the means by which to embody stillness. *Ma* is simultaneously the moment before movement as well as the means by which we sense the moment of movement (Pilgrim, 1986:269), an expectant pause.

This explication also serves as a springboard towards the final thesis production where I will apply my theoretical frame to a scenographic event which I propose to develop through a process of devising. Here, I propose a performance not of meaning in the dramatic sense of the word, but of 'forces, intensities' and 'present affects' (Lyotard quoted by Lehmann, 2006: 37) in which there is a fluid transition and exchange between human bodies (the performer, spectator), the body of space, the bodies of materials and the body of time in an imaginative, imagistic and kinaesthetic manner. I propose a scenographic event that seeks to conjugate the act of engaging with materials of design (drawing and painting on paper, draping and tearing of cloth), with the spatio-temporal scenographic event. This is, in fact, a proposal for a thesis production which

consist of a theatre not of meaning in the dramatic sense, but of a space 'where a present image recalls absent ones, and a 'low density of signs' (2006:89) gives rise to a 'swarm of aberrant images ' (Bachelard,1994:18), in which the audience, designers and performers share an image and meet each other in imaginative resonance.

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APPENDIX A:

VISUAL RECORD OF THE FINAL THESIS PRODUCTION TITLED ‘uR’ .

Venue: Arena Theatre, UCT Hiddingh Campus, Cape Town.

Date: 26-29 November 2013.

Cast : Nicole Fortuin, Lexi Meier, Lea Seekoe.

















